

Dorothy M. Emmet (1904–2000)

Leemon McHenryⁱ

1. Brief *Vita*

Dorothy Emmet was born in London on September 29, 1904 and died in Cambridge on September 20, 2000. She was educated at home by a governess and her father who was the vicar of the village of West Hendred, and who later became the Dean of University College, Oxford. As she tells us in her memoir, *Philosophers and Friends*, her father was responsible for her interest in discussing ideas about fundamental questions (1996, 1). In 1923 she went to Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, where she finished with firsts in *Litterae Humaniores* (classics and philosophy) and saw the end of the Idealist tradition of F. H. Bradley and Bernard Bosanquet. Her teachers at Oxford included H. A. Prichard, R. G. Collingwood and A. D. Lindsay. After graduation, her first teaching experience came about as a result of the general strike of 1926 when she joined the Maesynhaf settlement in the Rhondda valley and taught Plato's *Republic* to unemployed Welsh miners.

In 1926, she read Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World* and decided to apply for a Commonwealth Fellowship to study with him in the United States. When asked during the interview why she wished to study with Whitehead, she replied, "Because I can't understand him." Since her examiners were equally mystified by Whitehead, they agreed this was a good reason for the transatlantic voyage. This was the beginning of Emmet's fascination with Whitehead's philosophy that lasted for the remainder of her life. She had close personal contact with him while a student at Radcliffe College, the woman's college near Harvard University. Whitehead had given the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in 1928, and when Emmet was in his classes in 1929, he was turning them into *Process and Reality*. A few passages of that work were taken directly from Emmet's lecture notes which she gave to Whitehead after classes. He had asked her to take down *verbatim* his ideas when he signaled since he believed he could sometimes express himself better in verbal expression than when writing.

Upon returning to England, she lectured on Whitehead's philosophy while a research fellow at Somerville College, Oxford. This resulted in her first book, *Whitehead's Philosophy of Organism* (1932), which was the first commentary on Whitehead. Feedback from Whitehead himself is included in the preface to the second edition (1966). He also complained that she made him too Platonic by interpreting his doctrine of eternal objects as existing in a separate world. After Oxford, Emmet was appointed Lecturer in philosophy at King's College, Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1932 and then moved to Manchester University in 1938 where she became the Sir Samuel Hall Professor of Philosophy and Head of the Department of

ⁱ Department of Philosophy, California State University, Northridge, 18111, Nordhoff Street, California 91330 USA; leemon.mchenry@csun.edu

Philosophy. She hired the philosophers Alasdair C. MacIntyre, Anthony John Patrick Kenny and Wolfe Mays. When she retired in 1966, she went to live in Cambridge with a group called the “Epiphany Philosophers” who were involved with the creation of the journal, *Theoria to Theory*. This group was devoted primarily to discussion of religious matters from within the vocation of philosophy. It included Richard Braithwaite, Margaret Masterman, Mary Hoskins and Ted Bastin. During this time, Emmet was also active in the Moral Sciences Club at Cambridge University. She was Fellow Emeritus of Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge, Honorary Fellow of Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, and received honorary degrees from the University of Glasgow, the University of Leicester and the Open University.

2. Metaphysics and Moral Philosophy

The encounter with Whitehead deeply impressed Emmet with the importance of central questions about the nature of things. She was thus unconvinced by the school of linguistic analysis that had achieved a stranglehold on British philosophy for most of the twentieth century. Her book *The Nature of Metaphysical Thinking* (1945) defends the project of metaphysics against the grain of anti-metaphysical methods, especially logical positivism. Metaphysics, she believed, had been rightly attacked as a kind of grandiose superscience, but she argued that it still remains a legitimate form of interpreting the world by working with analogies to provide a set of basic concepts that can be extended and thereby illuminate our experience of the world. Instead of seeing metaphysical theories as the viewpoint of a transcendent mind viewing the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, Emmet argues, we should rather view them as “‘compositions,’ products of the mind’s form-creating power, and born in particular types of selective experience” (1945, 195). Whitehead, for example, took the concept of organism from biology and generalized it in such a way that it became the fundamental idea for his basic ontology of actual occasions.

In one of her last articles, “Whitehead,” based on her contribution to a series of lectures on Cambridge philosophers in 1991, Emmet recounted a class session with Whitehead in which he said to his Harvard class, in reference to the high-minded inscription over the doorway at Emerson Hall, “You will have noticed that inscription as you came in. I suggest you substitute for it ‘Meditate on your viscera.’” Within the context of his metaphysics, the point was that our fully-conscious experience is an abstraction from a more rudimentary experience, and this is to be used as a basis upon which we form useful analogies regarding the rest of nature. Emmet writes: “So what Whitehead seems to be doing is fastening on our psycho-physiological embodied experience and stretching it upwards and downwards; upwards to cognition called here ‘conceptual feelings’, and downwards into the physical world, whose ultimate constituents have sentience, however ‘low-grade’” (1996, 113). Actual occasions are much further down the scale than micro-organisms, but as the basic units of feeling, they are the most basic organisms from which the whole order of nature develops. In another class, Whitehead said, “Write on my tombstone ‘He tried to form a cosmology’” (1996, 110-111). While recognizing that his efforts ran contrary to the positivist spirit of the times, Whitehead nonetheless saw that one must begin with the rich complexity of concrete experience and form a scheme of interconnected abstract concepts. This scheme must be adequate not only to the physical and biological sciences but

more generally to all human experience, including aesthetic and religious experiences. Such was the project of *Process and Reality*.

In mid-life, Emmet turned her attention to the other side of philosophy, namely, moral, social and political issues much influenced by her Oxford teachers. During this time at the Manchester University, her teaching and relations with colleagues in Government, Economics, and Anthropology resulted in a series of books that include *Function, Purpose and Powers* (1958), *Rules, Roles and Relations* (1966), *Sociological Theory and Philosophical Analysis*, edited with Alasdair MacIntyre (1970), and *The Moral Prism* (1979). The first three developed out of her view that philosophy had much to contribute to the social sciences by way of basic concepts political sociologists were using in interpreting societies. In *The Moral Prism*, she focused her attention on the complexity of individual moral decisions and addressed the question of how reliable moral judgments could be made given the diversity of moral theories. All of our moral theories suffer from various defects and no one covers the whole spectrum of moral experience. Emmet used the analogy of a prism to argue her case. We have no “white light” of morality that provides a satisfactory overall theory, but the partial theories “light up” certain aspects of morality just as the white light gets split up into the different colors through the prism. Decision making in moral matters is a creative activity brought to bear on a situation. The more we wrestle with moral situations, the more we develop our powers of moral judgment.

3. Metaphysics Revisited

Emmet’s retirement in Cambridge was an enormously prolific period in which she returned to metaphysics much inspired by Whitehead’s thought. Here she explored Whiteheadian themes but adopted the approach of analytical philosophy in coming to a satisfactory theory. The task was to propose an ontology underlying causation and to elucidate the idea of process. In *The Effectiveness of Causes* (1986) and *The Passage of Nature* (1992) she developed these views in relation to philosophers such as W. V. Quine, Peter Strawson and Donald Davidson.

One of the most important aspects of these two books is her critical evaluation of an exclusive ontology of events. So, she argued against Whitehead’s view of events as basic particulars because events, in her view, are happenings to particular participants in those occurrences. She writes in *The Passage of Nature*, for example, that “Social processes illustrate my general view of processes as sustained and carried forward by the activities of their participants” (1992, 87). In this respect, she sides with Davidson over Whitehead, Buddhists and Parfit, because events or processes by themselves cannot give us efficacy in causation. This is the key issue in deciding between rival ontological schemes on the status of events. “Efficacy calls for actions and reactions, and the question is whether what might be called an active process [...] needs active constituents [...]. The capacity to act and be acted on is my general criterion of being a thing as distinct from a process or event” (1992, 49). Moreover, she argues that in moral theory we must have agents or persons as the enduring objects of action if we are to have a satisfactory account of responsibility. An adequate ontology in this regard demands both substances and processes.

Emmet’s view is largely thought out on a macroscopic level of objects and events much like Davidson’s theory. It is thus unclear whether her position can be maintained consistently on a microscopic level of subatomic particles or at the level of atomic events (as one finds in

Whitehead's later metaphysical theory). She requires agency for causation and argues that this cannot be accomplished by an exclusive ontology of events. Events do not act, she contends; they merely happen as a result of the actions of things (1992, 19). Whitehead derives such agency from the subjective aim of his actual occasions, and thereby constructs the whole system of nature upwards. But Emmet rejects Whitehead's omnipresence of feelings or sentience in what we ordinarily call "inanimate nature," because this suggestion is "too high a price to pay for securing one basic type of all natural things" (1992, 101). So, in the end, the matter depends on the strength of Whitehead's case for panexperientialism. It might very well be "too high a price" for our ordinary common-sense conceptual scheme, but the sort of revisionary scheme Whitehead had in mind provides comprehensive explanatory power, especially for biological phenomena, consciousness and creativity throughout nature.

Emmet was critical of the Whiteheadian school that formed in praise of his thought because it is a world of its own "with little or no communication with other kinds of philosophers" and because it has tended to treat Whitehead as a type of guru. Victor Lowe, another student of Whitehead at Harvard, echoed a similar complaint. A Whiteheadian school was the last thing he would have wanted. In place of hagiography and the tendency to concentrate on the religious implications of his later metaphysics, more attention to his philosophy of science, Emmet claimed in *Philosophers and Friends*, "might help to bring some of his thought back to the attention of mainline analytic philosophers" (1996, 37). In many respects this is precisely what she was doing in *The Effectiveness of Causes* (1986) and *The Passage of Nature* (1992).

While it might be the case that Whitehead's greatest influence has been in theology rather than in philosophy and that certain types of Whiteheadian scholarship have been confined to a relatively small group of devotees, there have been some recent developments that Emmet would have applauded. Outside the mainstream of Anglo-American analytical philosophy, there is a growing interest in Whitehead's philosophy in Europe and in Asia. And perhaps even more to the point, there are a number of works recently published by physicists who have found in Whitehead a unifying concept for the diverse theories of physics. This is the very sort of attention to his philosophy of science that Emmet deems most valuable.

Emmet was one of the earliest pioneers in interpreting Whitehead's philosophy. She was at the right place at the right time. This gave her a unique perspective in understanding the basic insights of his thought. But she always maintained a critical distance despite being in the presence of the great. Whitehead himself made the point clearly when he said "the worst homage we can pay to genius is to accept uncritically formulations of truths which we owe to it" (R 88).

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1.3. Papers

Dorothy Emmet's papers are in the Library of Lucy Cavendish College, University of Cambridge, under the archive file "Genesis, Developing Access to Women's History Sources in the British Isles." The collection includes correspondence and reviews of Emmet's book publications, articles by Emmet and other authors, photographs, journals, correspondence and family papers.

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